

see folklorists belittling the other side out of self-defense as they play an adult version of “they started it.” My vision is for this unproductive spat to end. We ought to acknowledge how the various approaches to folklore complement and deepen our own areas of expertise so that we can move the discipline forward. The focus for the field, after all, should not be on us but on the people and the cultural forms on which we base our livelihood.

Visibility, Functionality and Proactivity: Visions for the Future of Public Folklore

Susan Eleuterio

My vision for public folklore is that it will become more visible, more functional, and less reactive than it's been for the last part of this century. Many of public folklore's current activities, such as education at the K-12 level and for teachers at the college level, festivals, and public programs, are only visible to their creators and participants. We reinvent the wheel too often in public folklore partly because we lack visibility even to ourselves. It's often difficult for us to function well in the face of time constraints, lack of funding, and ineffective means of communicating both to ourselves and to others.

The last twenty years has brought us some security in the form of nationally based and state level folklorists. But even as we've become a part of formal culture (i.e., the government) we have continued to suffer from a lack of visibility and from a reactive rather than a proactive approach to our dreams, goals, and objectives. In addition, our functionality as a community seems limited to me. State level folklorists meet with each other at national conferences, but those of us who work as independent contractors suffer from a lack of means to get together (except in the corners at the American Folklore Society, when we can afford to go to the meetings). Our national folklorists, based in Washington, D.C., have made efforts to draw the rest of us in—but their efforts and publications do not often seem designed to serve the needs of those of us who are not attached to an organization.

New technologies, such as e-mail and the Internet, have begun to help us achieve greater visibility. At the same time, creative use of older technology—particularly radio—has raised the public's level of awareness of folklore as a field, and folklorists as professionals. For the cost of a local phone call, we can reach across the nation—and even outside its borders—to raise issues, ask for help, and plan our work together, improving our ability to function over time and space.

My last concern, reactivity, remains a problem for us to solve as the calendar turns towards the “twenty hundreds.” How often do we allow ourselves to take time to plan, reflect on, and evaluate our work?

Folklorists can become more visible and less reactive if our national, state-level, and university-based folklorists spend more time drawing us together through regional projects that are based on solid research and planning. This needs to be done in alliance with those who do similar work, but don't call it folklore. At the same time, all of us need to continue to make use of both technology and non-technology based opportunities to improve our ability to function in a world that often denies the existence of folklore, at the same time that it is being buffeted by its belief systems, attitudes, and traditions.

Next Steps

Burt Feintuch
University of New Hampshire

Recognizing that visions of the future are always contingent and nearly always wrong, I offer one that is utopian. Here is what I would like to see the future hold.

First, the trivial: We need a new name, replacing, "public folklore" with some formulation that makes sense to newcomers and does a better job rallying people.

Second, the methodological: We need an articulation of dramatically more ambitious principles for the public folklore enterprise. This articulation should lead to the development of practices that move the world toward those principles. Although public folklore continues to make incremental strides, it seems that it—like much work in other realms—it is bound up in a variation of infinite regression, spinning out new possibilities from old models, worrying about old issues, lapsing inward, and making less difference in the world than it should. This, in my view, has to do with a reluctance or inability to engage large issues of economics, class, and other structures of power and influence. That, in turn, denies the radical potential of our work to influence human relations. And that needs to change.

Third, the consequential: A genuinely progressive public folklore should help end the destructive craziness that truncates social bonds, denies creativity, keeps people from acting in concert, and constantly gets in the way of accomplishing human society.